

User Experience: The next step for IA's?

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Abstract

Information Architects (IA's) have always wondered how to define information architecture in relation to other fields. Starting with the early days of library science, through the "discovery" of other fields, the times when experienced IA's called themselves Big IA's, to modern days of business design and experience design, the borders have been fuzzy. I hope to show that, despite the fact that most of us are proud to wear the label Information Architect, we are all User Experience practitioners who practice IA from time to time. Finally, I would like to show the next steps for IA's, which includes a call for international networks, and national events (such as the Italian IA Summit).

In the beginning there was Little IA

Ever since mankind started creating information, we have had to organize the results. The library of Alexandria in Egypt supposedly held somewhere between 40,000 to 700,000 items around 300BC. So, librarians have had some time to get organized: Based on the contents of their collections, they have created organization systems like the Dewey Decimal System that help users search and find items as well as related items. These organization systems included meta-data (data about data), controlled vocabularies (limited sets of names for groups of items) and indexes (references to items).

These days librarian-style IA's work in the same manner by inspecting volumes of content and finding ways to organize them, labeling groups of content and creating overviews like indexes and sitemaps, to allow for searching and finding.

In an article called "Big Architect, Little Architect" [1], Peter Morville, co-author of the IA-bible "Information Architecture for the World-Wide Web", calls these tasks the work of the Little IA: "At one end of the spectrum, the little information architect may focus solely on bottom-up tasks, such as the definition of metadata fields and controlled vocabularies."

Fast forward to the web age: Complexity arises

After the World Wide Web was established and loads of websites were being designed and built, it became clear that a lot more professions were involved in building great online information sources; one single webmaster was not enough to create and maintain a visually appealing, well-organized, usable, and smoothly operating site. And most of these professions had existed for a while before the web was born.

I am talking about industrial design, graphic or visual design, information design, interaction design, usability engineering, copywriting, marketing & communications and computer science, to name a few.

People who cared about defining the field of Information Architecture started mapping out these related fields, trying to visualize the relationships in diagrams. Some of these got rather complex because of the sheer number of relationships.

Big IA, or: Why we are special

An easy way out of this complexity was to say that Information Architecture was the one field that embraced the others, that all the other fields were sub-fields of IA.

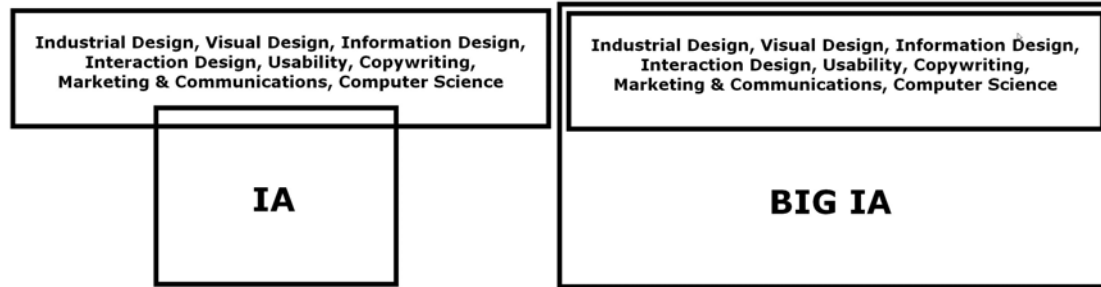


Figure 1 – Little IA versus Big IA

This is the so-called “Big IA” model: “At the other end [of the spectrum], the Big Information Architect may play the role of ‘an orchestra conductor or film director, conceiving a vision and moving the team forward’” (from the same article by Peter Morville [1]).

This model puts IA’s in a position to manage other professionals, to steer them, to be the first to determine what other specialists we need, and to control their deployment. But what is it that makes IA’s so special that they can do this? Is there a certain skill in the training of IA’s that allows them to see more than the other professionals?

I believe that *all* practitioners, not just IA’s, who have had experience with the other fields (so usually the more senior practitioner), can build up this particular skill. So I don't believe IA’s are more important than other professionals. But that means we need another model of IA, one that allows us to fit us into the other professions.

Shallow and Deep IA

I believe that there is a set of skills handed down from the library sciences that defines our “deep”, or core knowledge. They are skills associated with organizing large amounts of information, and deal with controlled vocabularies, with indexing or adding metadata that defines the data, allowing for searching and finding, and representing the information in a meaningful way.

And I do believe that, even though the responsibilities overlap, there are things that IA’s are better at than other professionals, and that we should teach others how to do them best. These are the skills that deal with analyzing the structure of information, determining its attributes and values, and its uses (“content analysis”), finding our way in large volumes of content (“navigation”), and organizing content into comparable chunks and giving them meaningful names (“labeling”).

Business IA

There is an additional set of skills that is a small step away from the core skills of IA’s, but that is crucial to our survival: business IA skills. These deal with predicting and measuring the cost and impact of the use of information, with creating an organization that promotes and use information most efficiently and an organization that knows where it can improve the use of information.

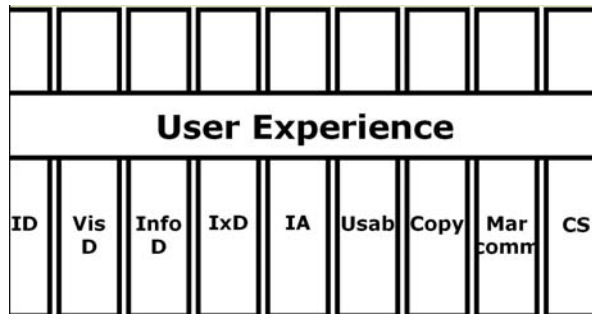
These skills should be applied in our work, because, as Lou Rosenfeld, says: “The exercise of designing an information architecture – learning or defining what an organization is, what it wants to communicate and to whom, and what its business model is – is ultimately about strategy” [2]. When defining an information architecture, we are refining a business strategy.

But they can also be applied to the organization of our work. If we know the cost and impact of our activities in projects, we can influence our own organization to use our skills more efficiently. We then can improve the way we are deployed in projects, and explain our need to managers and liaisons elsewhere.

Overlap with other fields: User Experience

As I indicated before, there is an overlap with other fields, in more than one place. In fact, all the other fields that surround us will have a similar world-view with deep skills, specific to their field, and shallow

skills that they share with their “neighbors”. Business skills tend to be less specific to a particular field, although an understanding of the deep and shallow skills is required there too.



It is my opinion that the understanding of the specific skills that each field brings to the table, but especially the overlap between them, is the key to designing great user experiences. Any person who has a background in one or more of these fields and has gained insight into what activities are best performed by which professional using the right methods and tools is, in my view, a user experience practitioner.

Figure 2 – User Experience overlaps other fields

User experience practitioners need insight into other fields, because, as the Nielsen Norman Group says, the “user experience encompasses all aspects of the end-user's interaction with the company, its services, and its products.” [3] Just looking at the structure of the information that is exchanged in an interaction with a company is not enough. Just looking at its shape, size and color isn't enough either. Nor is just looking at how quickly and efficiently a computer can deliver the information isn't enough, or at what words make the user *want* the information. It is all of those looks, plus a couple more, that do the trick.

IA's are User Experience professionals

Unless you have never done anything else than analyze, structure and group large volumes of content only to hand-off that work to others, you have probably been acting as an interaction designer, information designer, computer scientist, business analyst, or usability engineer before. In fact, I doubt that your diploma says you are “Information Architect”.

The truth is that most of us came from other fields, and are only now gaining experience in the deep, shallow and business skills of Information Architecture. And even inside our field, depending on where you came from and what you are doing, you are moving from shallow to deep, from deep to business, or from inside our field in the direction of another field or vice versa.

All this is a sign that you are in fact a user experience professional; gaining insight into what skills you have and when they can be useful, what skills others with related backgrounds have, and how to best combine them to create engaging user experiences.

Next steps for IA's

So, if user experience is not “the next step” for Information Architects, because we already are user experience practitioners, what are the next steps?

First of all, we need to get to know the fields around us, to see where we stand. We need insight into the overlap with those other fields. This means studying the effects of our combined efforts, learning where the user experience works and where it breaks. We need user experience researchers and by definition, they can be located anywhere in the spectrum of user experience fields.

Other fields need to get to know us as well: We need to teach other practitioners the skills that are rooted in our field, but have a strong overlap with other fields. I have called this “Guerilla IA”, after Jakob Nielsen's definition of “Guerilla Usability” [4].

Guerrilla IA is a set of simplified IA methods that can be a way for a company to gradually build up its reliance on systematic IA methods, starting with the bare minimum and gradually progressing to a more refined lifecycle approach. Of course this doesn't always need to apply to a whole company, but can be used for an individual professional as well.

Examples of these skills and the materials that aid in learning them are card sorting exercises, content inventory templates, project plans and estimations, design patterns, descriptions of IA models, methods and tools, as well as case studies explaining what went good or bad.

Once we get a feeling for our overall place in the user experience field, we can try to draw some lines in the sand and define the borders of Information Architecture. My T-model for the field of Information Architecture [5], with deep, shallow, business and guerilla skills, may be a good place to start.

Then we need to really educate students of Information Architecture and allow them to become user experience practitioners with a solid background in IA. This

means students need to learn about our deep skills, learn what other fields surround us and where the overlap is, and learn how their work impacts organizations (including their own). And they need to apply that knowledge in multi-disciplinary projects, sometimes playing the role of another professional in our field. We should also invite outsiders to tell us about their field and how they see ours.

Finally, we need to make sure that anywhere someone wants to learn about our field, someone must be nearby to help. We need Information Architects on every continent, in every country, and in every commercial, educational and governmental organization that deals with organizing information for use. We need IA's to be everywhere and we need organizations that support IA's everywhere, from worldwide lobbyists to local social networks.

I encourage you, user experience practitioners with an interest in IA, to participate in such an organization, and help shape the future of Information Architecture.

References

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- [2] Lou Rosenfeld, "The Tail Wags The Dog", <http://www.ddj.com/documents/s=3257/nam1012432633/index.html>
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- [5] Peter Boersma, "T-model: Big IA is now UX", <http://www.peterboersma.com/blog/2004/11/t-model-big-ia-is-now-ux.html>

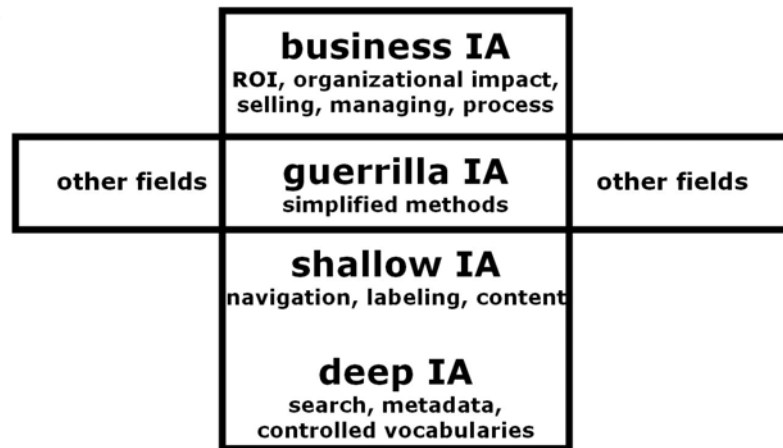


Figure 3 – T-model for IA